

Minority Report Card

Why do many minority graduates of professional schools have more difficulty than their classmates with the state exams that grant them licenses?

Last May, *The New England Journal of Medicine* published one answer that turned out to be a bombshell. In a brief editorial, a professor from the Harvard Medical School suggested that many medical faculties, including his own, have been deliberately easing blacks and others through the system in order to graduate larger numbers of minority students. "It would be a rare person today," wrote Dr. Bernard D. Davis, "who would question the value of stretching the criteria for admission and of trying to make up for earlier disadvantages." But in their eagerness to help disadvantaged students, he charged, some medical schools are handing out diplomas to people who may not be qualified to be doctors. "It is cruel to admit students who have a very low probability of measuring up to reasonable standards," Davis said. "It is even crueler to abandon those standards and allow the trusting patients to pay for our irresponsibility."

Davis's letter, and his call for a review of minority education at professional schools, exposed a bitter academic debate that has raged privately for nearly a decade. In 1968, most graduate schools of law and medicine set out as a matter of policy to educate more students from minority groups. The educators realized that the new students, arriving often from poor schools and with serious educational handicaps, would have to be given special consideration for admission—and extra academic support to make sure they succeeded.

Success: By statistical standards, the preferential-admissions programs are a success. Only 783 blacks were enrolled in medical schools during the school year 1968-69, most of them in predominantly black institutions. This year, 3,456 black students are studying to be doctors in medical schools of all kinds. During the same period, Mexican-Americans have increased their enrollment in medical school, from 59 students to 699. The number of black law students has risen almost as dramatically, from only about 1,600 in 1968 to 5,127 this year.

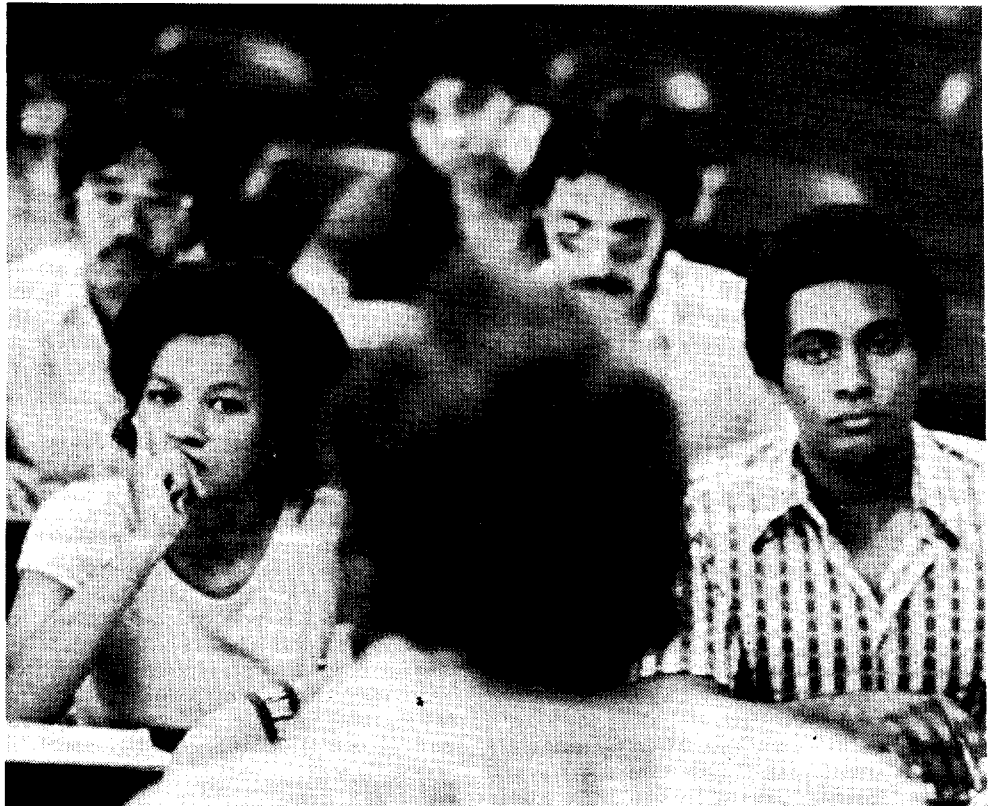
But some critics have never been happy with special admissions. In 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments in the case of *Marco DeFunis*, a white law student who charged that the University of Washington Law School had accepted several blacks with lesser academic credentials than his own, but had rejected him. The High Court refused to consider his case, since *DeFunis* had since been accepted at law school and was about to graduate. But several similar cases of

"reverse discrimination" are now in the lower courts, awaiting their turn in Washington.

What disturbs some educators even more than "reverse discrimination" are signs that preferential admissions to professional schools have meant taking in people who simply cannot do the work. Attrition rates among special-admissions students are higher than those of their classmates, a fact that feeds the belief

among minority students, it was 61 per cent. Special-admissions students have also had more difficulty than their classmates in passing state medical exams on the first try.

Advocates of special-admissions programs admit that in the first rush to admit minority students, some professional-school administrators probably overreacted and accepted some who really couldn't do the work. Since then, they insist, they have learned to screen the applicants much more accurately. "Frankly, we do not have a large number of applicants from minority groups with credentials as good as the best in the pool," says Kenneth Pye, dean of the Duke University Law School. "But we



Alan Copeland

Boning up: Students in California prepping to enter law school

that many should not have been accepted in the first place. At the University of Michigan Medical School, for example, 20 per cent of all black students fail to graduate, as compared with only 4 per cent of their white classmates.

Harvard's Davis insists that he supports preferential admissions. What he worries about, he says, is whether faculty members, in their eagerness to graduate minority students, are succumbing to "the temptation to award . . . diplomas on a charitable basis." Some of Davis's colleagues think that the evidence for his accusations is clear: special-admissions students have so far simply not done as well as their classmates on the state exams that they take to get licenses. In California, the first-time-failure rate for law students taking the bar exam between 1970 and 1973 was 30 per cent;

do have minority applicants who can do acceptable work—and that's the object, that any students we accept should be able to pass without any favoritism."

Supporters of preferential admissions dispute bitterly Davis's suggestion that some minority graduates of professional schools may not be as qualified as their classmates. To charges that professors give special-admissions students passing grades out of "charity," law-school administrators respond that most examinations at their institutions are graded "blind," making it almost impossible for professors to award marks on anything but the merits. Furthermore, professional-school education does not allow students to duck requirements and thus seek out easier routes to diplomas. Once they've been accepted, minority students must pass all the courses their

classmates take—even as they overcome some special hurdles of their own. The great majority do make it through to graduation. And, says Dr. Arthur Hoyte, a black medical professor at Georgetown University, “they have literally sweated blood to get there.”

The educational deficiencies that plague minority students—most notably, basic-science preparation and writing skills—are precisely the ones that hold them back once they are in professional schools. Many schools report that most of their special-admissions students finish in the bottom half of their classes. Supporters of special admissions feel that this should come as no surprise to faculty members. “Of course affluent white students who have studied science at large private universities are going to have an advantage,” says Hoyte. Others make the same case for minority students at schools of law and business: that the verbal talents amassed during sixteen years of good schooling give middle-class students an enormous advantage over the economically and educationally deprived.

Hurdles: Some minority students also face more subtle obstacles in their work. “I’ve never thought of myself as second-class in any sort of medical situation,” says Woody Myers, a third-year medical student at Harvard. But the first time Myers entered one professor’s office without his white coat and stethoscope, a secretary mistook him for a delivery boy. His wife, Debra, who is also a third-year medical student, is constantly mislabeled by hospital personnel. “When she goes into an operating room, they think she’s one of the people who come in to clean up the blood after the surgeons are finished,” Myers reports. “She has to go around with a tag on her hand saying



Ira Wyman

Davis: A concern for medical standards

MEDICAL STUDENT so she won’t be told to leave the room until the operation is finished.”

In at least ten states, civil-rights groups have challenged licensing exams on the ground that they may be racially biased in favor of middle-class whites. But careful reviews of the tests have turned up scant evidence that this is so. What does seem to give the minority students trouble is that, by definition, the written exams explore those areas where they are traditionally weakest. “The bar exam does not test how well they can argue before a jury, negotiate with other lawyers or figure out what’s going on with a client,” says Charles Lawrence, 33, a black graduate of the Yale Law School who teaches in San Francisco.

Many medical experts echo that view. They point out that it is in the first two years of medical school that minority students have the most trouble catching up—the years when the most paperwork is required and when, consequently, the students’ lack of background shows up most glaringly in tests. But when they get to actual clinical experience, large numbers of minority students do every bit as well as their classmates—and clinical experience simply cannot be tested on paper. “A student’s ability as a doctor,” says Dr. Alvin Poussaint, dean of student affairs at the Harvard Medical School, “is not necessarily related to how he performs on tests.”

But the hard fact remains that licensing tests for doctors and lawyers are mandated by law, and most schools are trying to ensure that all their special-admissions students receive extra help to get through. The Cornell University Medical College maintains a summer research fellowship for minority students. At the end of their junior year in college, twenty prospective applicants

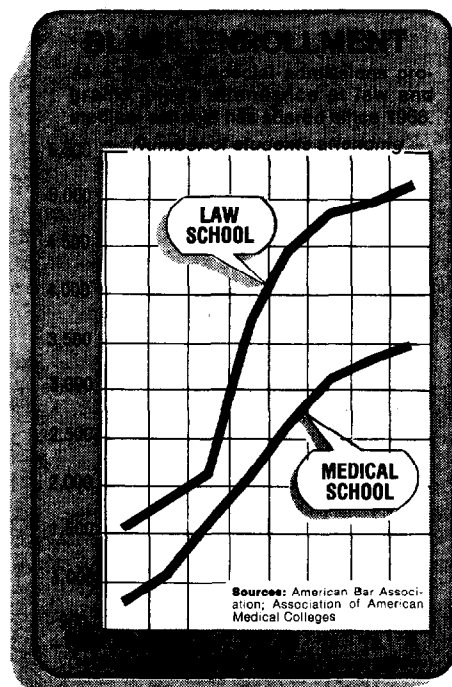
come to Cornell’s New York campus to work with a faculty member in the med-school labs. UCLA offers a “prologue to medicine” program to any entering medical student whose skills need bolstering.

For aspiring minority lawyers, the main preparatory aid has been CLEO—the federally funded Council on Legal Education Opportunity. Every summer since 1969, CLEO has provided six-week programs on law-school campuses across the country to help students develop the verbal and reasoning skills they will need. This year, seven CLEO programs are operating, from Berkeley to the University of Pennsylvania, with four law-school professors and several upperclassmen serving as faculty at each site. A study of the law-school records of 346 students trained by CLEO between 1971 and 1973 shows that 300 had passed the bar by June 1974; 276 of them passed on the first try.

On the whole, say supporters of preferential admissions, the outlook for aspiring minority professionals should be better than ever. Not only have schools and outside programs refined their methods of catching students up, but the pool of applicants has so increased, as a result of active recruiting and burgeoning undergraduate programs, that law and medical schools can now be far more selective in admitting minority students. At the Case Western Reserve Medical School in Cleveland, dean Frederick Robbins reports that in 1968 his admissions office could find only 50 possible minority applicants. “Now,” he says, “they’re out there in the hundreds.” Dr. James L. Curtis, associate dean at the Cornell medical school, recalls that admissions officers there selected about ten minority students in 1969 from a pool of 25; last year, they admitted the same number from a group of 750 applicants.

No Retreat: But concerned educators warn that this is no time to relax. Tight budgets have already led many schools to cut back recruitment and the financial aid that is essential for most minority students. The number of black students entering medical school fell in 1975—to 1,036 from 1,106 the year before—and the percentage of law students who are black has fallen every year since 1973. According to Walter Leonard, assistant to the president of Harvard, the specter of another DeFunis case—plus remarks like those from Davis, who admits that his charges are largely speculative—could slow progress still further. “These are assaults on what have really been very meager advances for minority students,” says Leonard. “For those who think they’ve done enough, these attacks give an excuse to stop.” To lose the hard-won gains that have been made, he warns, would be an enormous tragedy.

—MERRILL SHEILS with SYLVESTER MONROE in Boston, HOLLY CAMP in Chicago, CHRISTOPHER MA in Washington and bureau reports



Robert Rittler